Syria: We Are Debating the Wrong Issues!

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As we put together this issue of Saturday Briefing, U.S. President Barack Obama is trying to convince Congress that it is necessary for the United States to bomb targets in Syria to make clear the civilized world’s disgust at the gassing of innocent civilians by that nation’s embattled dictator, Bashar Assad, and to deter further use of this horrifying weapon in Syria’s ongoing civil war.

This would be a very risky step because no one can predict the outcome of an American intervention. Although Obama’s proposal is for a “limited” action, it could start a chain of events that would have widespread and significant harmful effects, including damage to the global Travel & Tourism industry.

In my view, if the United States gets involved in Syria’s internal strife, it would be comparable to a couple of well-meaning police officers choosing to get in the middle of a turf war between rival street gangs in a poor inner-city area of a major metropolis like Detroit, Chicago or New York City. Neither gang likes the police, but either of them might accept police help to win. After the battle is over, the winning gang will not thank the police officers and change its ways, but will turn on the officers, continue its illegal activities and even expand them.

In the case of Syria, the “gang” lines are, in part, drawn between familiar religious factions.

- The Shiites, including the revolutionary, theocratic Iranian regime and the well-armed and -trained Hezbollah militia from neighboring Lebanon, are backing Assad.
- The Sunnis, Syria’s majority sect, generally support the rebel forces.

The rebel forces are widely reported to be increasingly dominated by radical Islamist/jihadist factions allied to or offshoots of al-Qaida.

Both sides in the civil war can be expected to continue hating and trying to attack the United States and its Western allies, which are predominately Christian.

An American attack on the Assad regime will therefore likely be seen in Syria and much of the Islamic world as another in a series of interventions against the Arabs and Muslims, increasing the enmity for America and the West by both sides in Syria’s civil war – and by many others.

As heinous as the gassing of civilians in Syria is, former Congressman Newt Gingrich makes sense when he suggests the U.S. should not get involved in Syria over that issue but instead focus strategically on two far more important topics:

- Nuclear arms proliferation, particularly in Iran, which is racing toward building “the bomb.”
- The rapid spread of radical Islamism in the Middle East.

No one can accurately predict the result of launching Tomahawk missiles from a U.S. destroyer into Syria.

- What will Assad’s supporter, Russian President Vladimir Putin do?
- What will the leaders of Iran do with their missiles and possible nuclear capabilities?
- Will a U.S. attack on Syria give Iran or Hezbollah an excuse to launch an attack on our ally Israel, the only stable Western democracy in the region?
- Might that possibility cause Israel to launch a preemptive strike to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability?

The history of the world repeatedly shows that a single event, large or small, can trigger a series of other events that ignite a major international conflict.

- World War I was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914.
- The United States kept out of Germany’s way as it invaded Poland in 1939, subjugated almost all of continental Europe in 1940-41 and brutally bombed Britain in 1940. That is, until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.
- Although the U.S. had had some military Special Forces and Central Intelligence Agency personnel in South Vietnam as “advisors” for several years, the August 2, 1964, attack on the destroyer USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese torpedo boats triggered the rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam.

Will a U.S. attack on Syria “. . . awaken a sleeping giant” in the Muslim world, much as Japanese Admiral Isoroku
Yamamoto is believed to have said about the United States after the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

I also worry about the members of our military. Over the past five years, while the percentage of Americans working full time has fallen, the cost of civilian “entitlements” (food stamps, welfare, unemployment, Medicaid, etc.) has exploded and the budgets of all branches of our armed services have been dramatically cut.

Beyond these budget cuts, across-the-board “sequestration” cuts have dug even deeper into funds available for our military. The men and women of our armed forces no longer have the most modern equipment and the proper level of readiness training. Morale is dropping due to repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Spending by all levels of government in the U.S. has soared and, at the federal level, the national debt today stands at $16.7 trillion, 58 percent above the $10.6 trillion level it had reached when Obama was inaugurated in 2009 and 198 percent above the $5.6 trillion level at which it stood when George W. Bush took office in 2001! (Source: U.S. Treasury, http://1.usa.gov/11nRor9 and Washington Post, http://wapo.st/1374sxx)

State, county and city budgets are also strained. The city of Detroit is the latest government entity to go bankrupt.

The U.S. is in a precarious situation in many ways. That is what we should be debating rather than whether we should be single-handedly launching missiles into a Muslim country halfway around the world.

One quite predictable result of U.S. intervention will be a big jump in the price of oil. This will raise the cost of jet fuel, making airline tickets more expensive. Leisure and business travel will then drop, hitting all parts of Travel & Tourism hard.

The price of diesel and gasoline will also spike, making almost everything more expensive, with consequences for the broader U.S. economy. Employment opportunities will decrease, established companies will cut back or go bankrupt, and entrepreneurs will be less likely to invest in new businesses. Yet taxes will go up to cover the cost of military action if an attack leads to a broader or prolonged conflict.

It’s a vicious circle.

Add to the above the totally incalculable but very significant costs of the Obamacare legislation, which begin to kick in less than four months from now.

The U.S. is in a very dangerous position, perhaps the worst I have seen in my nearly 80 years on this earth. This is not a time to add significant additional risk.

That’s my view. Readers of Saturday Briefing may agree or have other views. No matter what your views are, if Congress has not authorized missile strikes on Syria by the time you read this article, I urge you to immediately send a short email to your senator and representative to tell them how you feel.

For members of our ‘ohana in Hawai’i and Colorado, here are the email addresses:

**HAWAII**

Sen. Brian Schatz (D)
http://schatz.senate.gov - click on “contact Brian”

Sen. Mazie Hirono (D)
http://hirono.senate.gov - click on “contact Mazie”

1st – Rep. Colleen Hanabusa (D)
http://hanabusa.house.gov - click on “contact me”

2nd – Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D)
www.gabbard.house.gov - click on “contact, email me”

**COLORADO**

Sen. Mark Udall (D)
http://www.markudall.senate.gov - click on “leave a comment”

Sen. Michael Bennet (D)
http://www.bennet.senate.gov - click on “contact Michael”

1st - Rep. Diana DeGette (D)

2nd - Rep. Jared Polis (D)
http://polis.house.gov - click on “Email Jared”

3rd - Rep Scott Tipton (R)
http://tipton.house.gov - click on “Email Me”

4th - Rep. Cory Gardner (R)
http://gardner.house.gov - click on “Contact Cory”

5th - Rep. Doug Lamborn (R)
http://lamborn.house.gov - click on “Contact Doug”

6th - Rep Mike Coffman (R)
http://coffman.house.gov - click on “Contact”

7th - Rep. Ed Perlmutter (D)
http://perlmutter.house.gov - click on “Email Ed”